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Jean Giono's War Record

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Introduction

In reassessing Giono's collaboration, certain difficulties must be recognised. Most serious is that any such attempt risks endorsing revisionist claims that French collaboration and Nazi atrocities have been exaggerated. A second problem relates to the historical context. These events unfolded in a climate of great fear and uncertainty. An awareness that we judge the actions of those who lived during more extreme times from the relatively safe vantage point of hindsight is needed. Third, the reliability of contemporary sources can be questionable. Finally, Giono's own word cannot be trusted. He often expressed his amazement that anyone would expect a writer (whose job is invention) not to embellish or invent ideas.

Given these difficulties, why even attempt to reassess Giono's record? In 1995,¹ Bertrand Poirot-Delpech offered one argument for such an attempt: the hundredth anniversary of Giono's birth (and fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War) is an appropriate point to 'restore him to his rightful place as one of the best writers of the twentieth century', despite what he terms the 'malentendu' (misunderstanding) of the Second World War. For Poirot-Delpech, 'The decision [to forbid Giono to publish] for two years discredits his censors, not Giono himself.'

Giono's Pacifism

As one of the most prominent French pacifists, Giono's actions in time of war were bound to attract attention; this was particularly true given his involvement with youth movements (young men being most likely to be mobilised). Since 1935, he had been adopted as a role model - one writer even called him the 'guide and prophet of the younger generation'² - by

members of the new Youth Hostelling movements, and by some of his readers in the Contadour experiment. This was an idealistic attempt to discuss, and actually create on a small scale, the 'conditions for peace and joy' following the idyllic vision of Giono's 1935 novel, *Que ma joie demeure*.

We might consider briefly here the subject of pacifism in Giono's works prior to the Second World War. His clearest statements came in essays in the late 1930s (then published separately, but later collected in *Ecrits pacifistes*). We find relatively few direct references to pacifism or war in his fiction, the clear exception being *Le Grand Troupeau* (The Great Herd/Flock), published in 1931. This (and particularly four unpublished chapters which became widely available in 1937 in *Refus d'obéissance* - Refusal to Obey) describes the relentless, dehumanising degradations, monotony and horror of war but without the black humour of works by contemporaries like Céline. The focus is the impact of war on individuals (mobilised men, women waiting for their return) and the book is dedicated 'To a dead man and a living woman'. Giono's pacifism centres on the individual: 'His instinctive pacifism [...] feeds on a deep-rooted respect for human life, too precious to be squandered on some false ideology or for mythical "future generations"'.³ That each individual should achieve joy in life is a constant in his fiction, both implicitly and explicitly linked to the need to avoid war. In his 1930s texts, this joy is found through work in a natural setting as an artisan or *paysan* (peasant farmer/smallholder); through human relationships and community; through self sufficiency and collaboration with nature rather than doomed attempts at domination; through a simple way of life - aspects which are all threatened by war.

On the eve of war in 1939, some criticised Giono for not providing a clear example, accusing him of hypocrisy and cowardice. Such accusations were probably unjustified, given Giono's long-standing refusal to act as a role model - 'I give orders to myself alone'.⁴ His actions were also sufficiently radical and conspicuous to lead quickly to his imprisonment. He signed calls for peace and tracts stating the futility of war. These were seen as dangerous because they were circulated among those about to be mobilised. Even here, however, we see Giono's unwillingness to give instructions: 'Once again, you are going to fight for nothing. You are going to kill for nothing. You are going to be killed for nothing. As for me, I've

made my decision. I won't dirty my hands in this cowardice.'⁵ He sent telegrams to Daladier and Chamberlain, calling on France and Britain to avoid war with Germany. He sent messages underlining the futility of war to Youth Hostelling groups.⁶ He refused to answer his mobilisation papers and stated that he had done so. He organised local people to tear down mobilisation posters in Manosque.

He was arrested and imprisoned in Marseilles for three months. As if to emphasise the absurdity of the phoney war, Giono was asked by the authorities to write pacifist tracts for distribution over Germany. (He agreed, but on the condition that the tracts would go to all European countries. Of course, this condition was refused).⁷ Giono was released from prison following the intervention of André Gide, among others. His mobilisation papers were withdrawn. Rather than his initial public attempts to prevent the war, it was his believed collaboration during the Occupation which led to his condemnation in 1944. Evidence of this collaboration can be examined in two categories - practical and intellectual.

Practical Collaboration

Giono spent the war in Manosque, occasionally travelling to Paris and Marseilles to visit productions of three of his plays, *Lanceurs de graines*, *Le Bout de la route* and *La Femme du Boulanger*. These were published during the Occupation, but had been written by 1933.⁸ Accusations of collaboration focus on these trips. Tristan Tzara, in his virulent denunciation of Giono in 1944, accused him of being 'anti-German in the zone sud [i.e. Vichy-ruled France] but violently Germanophile in Paris'.⁹ Such collaboration is notoriously difficult to confirm. One piece of evidence does remain. Karl Epting, in charge of Cultural Affairs under Otto Abetz, recorded names of French intellectuals he met. Giono appeared on the long list, as did Cocteau, Giraudoux, Montherlant, Valéry and many others. The impression that Giono was particularly ready to meet the occupiers persists; a 1995 article in the *Nouvel Observateur* condemns him for having 'beaucoup cotoyé l'occupant' (often been in the company of the occupiers).¹⁰

Giono also published work until 1943. Stories and plays were published by Gallimard and Grasset (though many had been written earlier), all on

now-familiar themes - nature, the arrogance of men aiming to dominate natural forces, reactions against modern farming and cities, the search for joy, community, the paysan and artisan, the role of the writer, adventure. Controversially, his work appeared in the *Nouvelle Revue française* and *La Gerbe*. Others (Gide and Cocteau) also published in Drieu La Rochelle's *NRF*, however, and Jean Paulhan, an active 'résistant' did remain as head of the Readers' Committee. *La Gerbe*, under Alphonse de Chateaubriant, was a declared pro-Hitler publication. One of Giono's already-published stories was reproduced there but he always denied knowing of the decision to publish his work.

This brings us on to the second type of collaboration of which Giono is accused. In his pre-war works, he addressed subjects (the importance of a more 'natural' way of life, the problems of life in modern cities, pacifism, work, the paysan) which would later be emphasised, to far different ends, by the Vichy regime. The emphasis placed by both on these themes led many to assume that the positions taken by Giono and the Vichy authorities were the same.

Intellectual Collaboration

How far can Giono and the Vichy regime be said to share the same ideas? He would probably reject the question as invalid. A constant source of frustration for Giono was the attempt to link him with political groups. He stressed that, on the basis of his unchanging ideas on pacifism, he was first accused of being a Communist in 1939, then of support for the right in 1944, even though he clearly denounced all political parties and ideologies. He was perhaps unfortunate, if naïve, in the use various groups made (or claimed to make) of his ideas. Paul Morelle emphasises this point: 'Giono paid little attention to events [of the Occupation]. But events (or rather the men in charge of them) paid attention to his ideas on the return to the land, and on naturism, which conformed to the dominant ideologies of the time.'¹¹ However, an examination of the ideas in Giono's works published before 1943 demonstrates how unfair such accusations are. If we consider the two areas mentioned by Morelle, the return to the land and naturism, it is difficult to see how Giono's position could be said to conform to that of Vichy.

With the first theme, the return to the land, there would seem to be

parallels with the Nazi emphasis on 'Blut und Boden' and the Vichy regime's official 'retour à la terre' policy. Yet, as Pierre Citron points out, and as Giono himself emphasised, the phrase 'retour à la terre' never actually appears in his work.¹² Consistent with his refusal to act as a role model, he criticises the faults of modern society, but refuses to offer prescriptive answers. He does contrast modern society with the recent past and a more traditional way of life (for example in the frequent references to his father's role as an artisan), but never argues that the answer to problems of modern life is a return to the past. Indeed, he is generally critical of a past which led to the First World War. He does write critically of modern cities, but many made such criticisms. Explaining this approach, Giono once again refused to generalise: 'Searching for my own happiness, I found it more easily outside cities than in the city. I write not so that you follow me, but so that you decide what is best for you'.¹³

Giono does write of utopian rural communities, but these are so obviously imaginary (with the half-human, half-deer Bobi, wild, barely-human girls who suckle animals in natural retribution for human beings' conceit, and strange fantastic rituals and celebrations) that to accuse Giono of preaching a wholesale return to the land via such images is at best naïve, at worst a cynical misrepresentation of his work. Indeed, he makes it clear, in *Regain* for example, that only those who already know and respect the land will be able to find joy in the types of community he describes. The tale of the government-sponsored professor who tries to practise what he preaches and turns good farmland into desert in a year is recounted with scorn by two villagers.

Where Giono makes more concrete suggestions, it is difficult to imagine the Vichy regime agreeing, although he does write on themes which were important under Vichy. He encourages self sufficiency, but only so that the paysan can avoid mobilisation and contact with the state. Paysans should produce only enough food for themselves, hide this and destroy any surplus so the state cannot feed the army. He calls on his readers to scorn politicians, writers (a typical feat of self contradiction), the older generation and all in authority who might encourage them to go to war. He describes in detail in *Le Grand Troupeau* how he sabotaged his rifle during the First World War to avoid killing anyone and how friends shot themselves in the hand to escape mobilisation. Marshal Pétain's reaction to such ideas

was unlikely to be one of approval. In his criticisms of capitalism (because it leads to war) and of property (he talks of the absurdity of 'owning' land and describes characters appropriating deserted farms), Giono seems closer to Communism than to the right. He was aware that such parallels would be drawn, however, and underlined his objections to this ideology too: 'There is no need for any leader. The partisan is obliged to accept war. Freedom from all parties is essential.'¹⁴

As for Morelle's second theme, naturism, it is true that Giono stressed themes which the Vichy regime would take up, for very different reasons. We can see why Vichy, after the debacle of invasion and convinced that the decadence of French youth had led to defeat, might welcome images of strong French paysans, in tune with the earth, relishing physical work and avoiding politics. However, to accuse Giono of conformism to Vichy ideology on the basis of such images, published during the previous decade, necessitates a wilful misinterpretation of his work. For instance, we would need to ignore his constant stress on the lack of nationality of the paysan - for Giono, paysans the world over have more in common with each other than with other citizens of their native land; many of the paysans in his work are actually Italian (like his own mother). Redfern is clear: 'Almost all the points in the [programme of] German National Socialism are totally alien to Giono. [...] nationalism and tyranny hardly go with Giono's stateless anarchism'.¹⁵

Some have argued that pacifism itself represented a type of collaboration, particularly in France. Throughout the 1930s, there had been a strong current of pacifist opinion in France, and by 1940, this pacifist trend was seen as an important factor in her defeat. That individuals like Giono held such strong pacifist views was to be expected. He had served in the French army during the First World War and expressed the disillusionment of many French people that far from being the war to end all wars, the First World War had accomplished nothing. This reaction was particularly pronounced among the group Giono held in highest regard, the paysans. 3.75% of the French population as a whole had been killed during the First World War, but estimates of the number of those killed from paysan backgrounds range from 55% - 80% of this total figure. France was still in the process of industrialising, of course, and François-Georges Dreyfus¹⁶ points out that paysans were not affected as unfairly

as was suggested at the time (since paysans made up around half of the active population). However, the perception that they had suffered more than other groups was generally accepted. Giono was clear that war represented 'the massacre of paysans from all countries'.¹⁷

Those who still considered themselves pacifist in 1940 were generally isolated ('chefs sans indiens' or 'peu mais purs' in Norman Ingram's terms)¹⁸ and increasingly seen as 'lâches' - cowards, and collaborationists. Many pre-war pacifists did collaborate with the occupiers but to consider pacifist beliefs as necessarily leading to collaboration is unjust to those who became active 'résistants' and also implies an unfair focus on pacifists, since the vast majority of French people did not actively resist the Occupation. At the very least, pacifists could claim to be accepting the Occupation on the basis of clear and deeply held beliefs, rather than personal advantage or apathy.

The final accusation of collaboration seems to contradict the others. In 1944, Claude Morgan condemned Giono - for doing nothing: 'His silence alone was a crime.'¹⁹ Here, perhaps is the key to the problem of Giono's collaboration. His ideas were not particularly unusual but they were held by a figure in the public eye, to whom many had looked as a role model. In fact, as Redfern points out, the irony is that Giono did act to some extent, sheltering refugees including Jews. It was, however, on his failure to set a visible example that he was to be judged. Giono's fame arguably also played a role in determining his punishment following the Liberation. How, then, did he fare in comparison to other well-known *épurés*?

Epuration

Edouard Herriot spoke for many in 1944 when he claimed that 'France must first go through a bloodbath'.²⁰ Moderate voices were few and far between in the first weeks of the Liberation - at *Les Lettres françaises*, for example, the hard-liners, like Claude Morgan and Vercors, were in control.²¹ The understandable desire for rapid justice and retribution led to arbitrary decisions. Giono was an early target for three reasons: he was well-known, an intellectual and in France.

Famous figures were more likely to be pursued because the coverage their punishment attracted served as an example and demonstrated that

justice was being done. Morgan even seemed to imply that the punishment should be tailored to the level of fame of the accused.²² Intellectuals attracted particular attention for two main reasons. First, they were considered to have a special responsibility in France. Their actions, whether they accepted the position of role model or not, were seen as influential. In 1945, Vercors explained the responsibility of intellectuals: 'Anything that is written and published is an act of thought. The writer is responsible for the consequences of this act'.²³ Giono was particularly vulnerable, perhaps, because he lacked patrons with influence. Those who had intervened on his behalf in 1939 were generally no longer able to speak for him. Second, as Pierre Assouline notes, intellectuals were less indispensable than other groups. The new government needed industrial leaders, the police force and the judiciary if they were to restore stability. The judges overseeing post-liberation trials were often those who had served under Vichy. Finally, unlike many intellectuals, Giono was actually in France at the Liberation. Justice had to be seen to be done quickly, and the punishments meted out in the early days were more severe than those in the following months. Marcel Jouhandeau claimed that 'If Drieu la Rochelle agrees to hide in a cellar for a couple of years, they'll make him a minister.'²⁴ Jean Paulhan may have been right when he said that Giono was better off in prison, because he would be safer there.

What actually happened to Giono? He was arrested again in 1944 and sent to prison. In 1945, after serving six months of his sentence, he was given a nonsuit and released, though remained on a blacklist for a further two years during which time he was forbidden to publish in France. He was sentenced to 'dégradation nationale'. Various articles accused him of collaboration in vitriolic terms. Tzara, for instance, accused him of dealing in 'words and human lives', concluding that writing was 'an honour' Giono didn't deserve.²⁵ The most long-lasting effect of Giono's punishment was the stigma attached to being an *épuré*. Even today, he is placed alongside far more committed collaborators. An article to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Liberation in the *Nouvel Observateur* had his photograph in the top row of a page of '12 épurés célèbres', alongside René Bousquet, Louis Renault, Céline and Charles Maurras.²⁶

The arbitrary nature of post-Liberation justice is seen when Giono's fate is examined in relation to that of comparable figures.²⁷ Here, a distinction must again be made between those writers who were in France,

and those who had gone abroad. In the second group, we might take André Gide as an example. Gide had published in the *NRF* and *Le Figaro*, and was attacked by Aragon and other Communist writers in 1944, as Giono was by Tzara. Gide, however, had flown to Tunisia in 1942 and spent most of the war outside France. He delayed his return until the atmosphere was 'more moderate' in April 1945 - a decision based on his fear that the Communists would take revenge for his pre-war publication, *Retour de l'URSS*. Other famous authors who arguably escaped more serious punishments by leaving France or staying in exile were Céline, Alphonse de Chateaubriant, Marcel Déat and Paul Morand.

As an example of those writers still in France, Sacha Guitry had openly socialised with the occupiers on a scale undreamt of by Giono. His works had been performed and published throughout the Occupation with far more success than Giono's (*N'écoutez pas*, *mesdames* was one of the biggest successes of the period). Yet Guitry served only two months in prison, in August-September 1944. Others were not so lucky. Some were executed, often without a trial in the early days of the Liberation, though these were often far more committed collaborators. Paul Chack, Robert Denoël, Philippe Henriot, Jean Luchaire and Georges Suarez were all killed between 1944 and 1945, while Pierre Drieu La Rochelle committed suicide to avoid trial.

Un écrivain de la lâcheté?

Giono's publishers Gallimard described his pacifist ideas when they were collected in 1978 as follows: 'What is striking is how up-to-date - and enduringly relevant - Giono's tone and message are, as are his chosen themes, which are now those of an entire generation of young people.'²⁸ His 'abstention' (to use Redfern's term) during the Occupation and the adoption by Vichy of themes he had stressed cannot simply be dismissed as a 'malentendu', though he might certainly be accused of extreme naïveté. But in any close consideration of his ideas, we cannot fail to notice their continued presence today. If studying his experience of the Occupation is an uncomfortable undertaking, it is perhaps because we are forced to question whether our own reactions would be any more radical.

NOTES

¹ Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, 'Le Faulkner de Manosque', *Le Monde des livres* (10 March 1995), p.(i). (My own translations used throughout).

² Lucette Heller-Goldenberg, 'Jean Giono et le Contadour', *La Revue des lettres modernes* (1974), No.385, p.94.

³ Walter Redfern, *The Private World of Jean Giono* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1967), p.69.

⁴ Jean Giono, *Refus d'obéissance* (Paris, Gallimard, 1937 & 1978), p.12.

⁵ Jean Giono, Tract distributed in Marseilles on 27 August 1939, quoted in Jean-Michel Guiraud, *La Vie intellectuelle et artistique à Marseille à l'époque de Vichy et sous l'occupation, 1940-1944* (Paris, CRDP, 1987), p.67.

⁶ These messages and telegrams are reproduced in Jean Giono, *Ecrits pacifistes* (Paris, Gallimard, 1978), pp.233, 251, 274 etc.

⁷ For further details, see Gilles & Jean-Robert Ragache, *La Vie quotidienne des écrivains et des artistes sous l'occupation* (Paris, Hachette, 1988), p.15 and Guiraud, *La Vie intellectuelle*, pp.67-68.

⁸ Giono was of course not alone in agreeing to have his works performed during the Occupation - see Ragache, *La Vie quotidienne* for details of others.

⁹ Tristan Tzara, 'Un Romancier de la lâcheté: Jean Giono', *Les Lettres françaises* (7 October 1944), No. 24.

¹⁰ Pierre Assouline, 'Le Prix des mots', *Le Nouvel Observateur* (3 August 1995), No.1604, p.13.

¹¹ Paul Morelle, 'Un Reclus de l'écriture', *Tendances - Vie culturelle littéraire* (August, 1971), Vol.15/72, pp.7-10.

¹² Pierre Citron, Préface, *Jean Giono: oeuvres romanesques complètes* (Paris, Gallimard, 1972 & various dates), p.xxvi.

¹³ Radio interview between Jean Giono and Gilbert Ganne, 1965, quoted in Lucette Heller-Goldenberg, *Jean Giono*, p.99.

¹⁴ Jean Giono, 'Précisions', *Ecrits pacifistes*, pp.260-261.

¹⁵ Redfern, *The Private World of Jean Giono*, p.104.

¹⁶ François-Georges Dreyfus, 'Le Pacifisme en France', *Le Pacifisme en Europe*, pp.137-144.

¹⁷ 'Lettre aux paysans sur la pauvreté et la paix', *Ecrits pacifistes*, pp.117-228.

¹⁸ Norman Ingram, 'L'Envers de l'entre-deux-guerres', *Le Pacifisme en Europe*, pp.17-42.

¹⁹ Ragache, *La Vie quotidienne*, p.271.

²⁰ Quoted in Maurice Larkin, *France since the Popular Front* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988), p.124.

²¹ See Ragache, *La Vie quotidienne*, pp.271-272.

²² Ibid., p.271.

²³ Ibid., p.288

²⁴ Pierre Assouline, 'Le Prix des mots', p.14.

²⁵ Tristan Tzara, 'Un Romancier de la lâcheté: Jean Giono'.

²⁶ 'Douze Epurés célèbres', *Le Nouvel Observateur* (3 August 1995), No.1604, p.13.

²⁷ For further details of the fates of individual writers, see Ragache, *La Vie quotidienne*, pp.296-308.

²⁸ Cf Jean Giono, *Ecrits pacifistes*.